

A Sermon for Thanksgiving Day at
St. John's Church, Norwood Parish
24 November 2005

Propers: Deuteronomy 8:1-3,6-10, 17-20; Psalm 65: 9-14; Matthew 6:25-33

Today, Thanksgiving Day, is a whole day devoted to what we do whenever we gather here to offer the Holy Eucharist. In this service, we tell again the stories that have shaped us in the Liturgy of the Word, and then we gather around the altar and offer there the Great Thanksgiving. As we do so often in the life of the Church, we are using words in different languages that mean the same thing: Eucharist is Greek for Thanksgiving. And, there is a fundamental connection between the Thanksgiving banquet tables around which we gather today, and the Thanksgiving banquet we share every time we gather at the altar table. We remember and tell again the stories that have shaped us; we share the foods which tell our story; and we thank God for sustaining and nurturing us and giving us occasions for rejoicing.

Our national day of Thanksgiving takes its origin in the harvest festival celebrated by the Pilgrims of Plimouth Plantation in 1621. It had actually been a horrible year for them. Disease and death had taken a terrific toll on their number. The Pilgrims were mostly town folk as well as religious refugees from England; so, they were quite unprepared for life as farmers. But guided throughout the growing season by a native American named Squanto, himself the lone survivor of the Pawtuxet village which itself had been obliterated by disease just years before, the 51 or so surviving Pilgrims had harvested bumper crops to sustain them through the coming winter. To celebrate, Governor Bradford ordered a harvest festival like those celebrated back in England. For three days – not one, but three days – there was feasting, drinking, dancing, and game playing – which would have been quite contrary to their strict Puritan religious observance – but, oh yes, there prayers of thanksgiving for God's providence. The feast included wild turkey from the countryside and lobster from the bay. To this festival, they invited the local Wampanoag people, and 90 of them came, bringing fresh venison to supplement the feast.

Unfortunately, that first harvest festival was not repeated until several years later, when much needed rain came and a fast became a feast of Thanksgiving. Over the years, relations with the local native peoples deteriorated into warfare, and they were no longer invited. Over 150 years later, in the midst of the War for American Independence, the Continental Congress called for a day of Thanksgiving in October 1777. And the first American Book of Common Prayer provided a special form of Morning Prayer for just such an occasion on the date "determined by civil authorities." It was again during a time of war, the Civil War, that President Lincoln proclaimed a National Day of Thanksgiving in November 1863. Presidential proclamations have followed every year since then. In the 1928 Prayer Book, the connection between Thanksgiving and the Lord's Supper was recognized, and Thanksgiving Day received the prayers and readings for a eucharistic celebration. In the current Prayer Book's

calendar, Thanksgiving Day and Independence Day are the two national days named as major feast days.

The undercurrent throughout the prayers and readings for today is summed up in the hymn refrain, "All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above, then thank the Lord, oh thank the Lord, for all his love." No matter how hard we have labored, everything we have is a gift. The Psalmist credits God with the bounty of crops and herds, as though they came as total gift to the farmer and shepherd. The children of Israel were warned, "Do not say, 'my power and the might of my hand haven gotten me this wealth.'" It had all been a gift entrusted to them. Jesus said that food, drink and clothing are among the gifts of God given to those who set their hearts on God's Kingdom and its righteousness. The Litany of Thanksgiving which we pray today, catalogs the blessings of this life as gifts to us from the goodness of God, and coaches us to respond, We thank you, Lord.

But Thanksgiving Day reminds us to give thanks not just for the gifts that bless our lives, but for having been sustained through the losses we have experienced as well. That first Thanksgiving festival followed a devastating winter, the Continental Congress called for Thanksgiving in the midst of war, as did Abraham Lincoln. President Bush's proclamation comes again this year in the midst of war, its horrors and losses. Although there are little ones sitting up to the table this year for the first time, there are also empty places at the table, and the odd discomfort about who will sit in Dad's place, or Grandma's, in Uncle Bob's or Aunt Anna's. And then there are those other losses -- the things left undone, the strained relationships, the failed enterprises, the toll of age and illness. We don't give thanks for loss, pain and heartache; we give thanks for God's abiding presence with us through them all. And we tell our stories again.

Maybe it's the pie or dressing that prompt a story about past celebrations, and who liked pumpkin and who liked pecan pie; why we like our dressing dry as toast or rich with oysters, fruit and nuts. Maybe it's the carving of the turkey or slicing of the ham that recall the care of a dear one who tried to teach us about the proper care and sharpening of the carving set; or stories about how the cutlery or china or stemware or linens came into the family. Maybe it's the story about one generation serving wine with the meal, in the disapproving face of the previous teatotaling generation, who nonetheless drank what was set before them and pronounced the wine "medicinal."

Or maybe it's the story of how on that night, when he had gathered with his friends, Jesus took the bread and broke it, took the wine and poured it, declared them his body and blood, and said whenever we do these things he would be with us again.

It is such a blessing to gather around our tables and tell our stories today.
Happy Thanksgiving!

Harrison West+